

# Building Business

Eileen Gould put together career as general contractor in industry with few women practitioners.

By **KAREN E. KLEIN** Staff Reporter

**E**ileen Gould was the only woman in the room when she took her general contractor's licensing exam back in 1996. Fast-forward nearly two decades: The world has changed a lot, but Gould remains a rarity as a female general contractor.

In fact, construction is the U.S. industry with the lowest concentration of women-owned firms, according to the 2015 State of Women-Owned Businesses report, an annual document commissioned by **American Express**. Just 7 percent of construction firms in the country are owned by women.

Yet despite her minority status in the industry, Gould, 58, said she has carved out a successful niche with her Westlake Village firm, **Eileen Gould Design & Construction Inc.** The business, which offers both interior design and remodeling services, employs five people full time and keeps 19 subcontractors hopping, some of whom have been with her for years.

Although she faced lean times during the recession, Gould said her company has come back strong, with \$2 million in revenue expected this year.

"I find that clients love the fact that it's a turnkey operation. I can do the drawings, hire and supervise the subs, design the interiors and put the candy in the candy dishes at the end of the job," she said.

Three years ago, she said that she identified a focus that has spurred the growth of her business by providing aging-in-place modifications for seniors who want to stay in their homes and workplaces but need wider hallways to accommodate wheelchairs or grab bars to make bathrooms safer. Her first job was for a retired couple in their 70s who had founded an airplane parts business in Camarillo.

"They had a lovely home on the water in Oxnard that they didn't want to leave. But there was no ground-floor bedroom and it was getting hard for them to climb stairs," she said.

She said the clients asked if an elevator could be installed. She conducted research and drew up plans.

"When I took them to the city, they thought I was losing my mind because nobody was doing elevators in residential," she said.

It was a challenge, but by showing city officials she could raise the roof and modify the entryway, Gould was able to get the permits needed for the job.

"We wound up with an elevator that has three stops. I even put Muzak in it," she said.

Aging-in-place modifications now account for about 20 percent of her business and she has started speaking, consulting and writing on the topic.

"I'm really grateful that I found it, because I love working with seniors," she said.

## To the rescue

From the time Gould was a child growing up in Philadelphia, she loved to decorate.

"I can actually walk into a space and visualize exactly how it should look," she said.

Personally, she leans toward modern and transitional interiors, but she typically defers to a client's aesthetic.

"As long as it's in scale, in good taste and meets all the (building) codes, I'm fine. Maybe I wouldn't like a yellow and pink bathroom, but if a client loves it and I can pull it off, that's fine," she said.

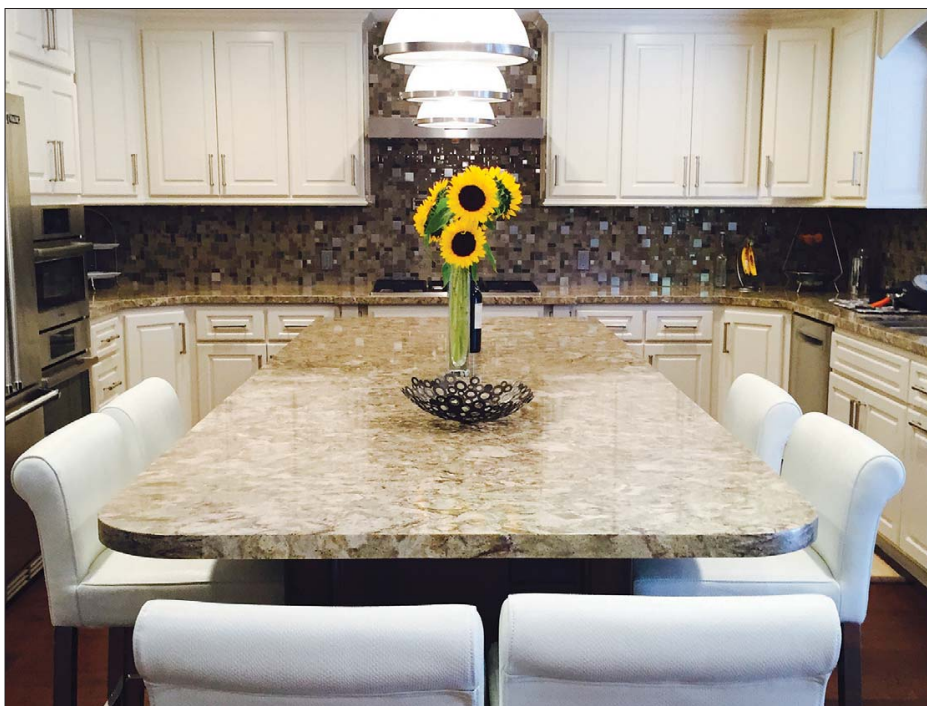
It was on large remodeling jobs and home additions in the 1980s when Gould often found herself ordering fixtures and overseeing painters and plumbers. But even though she was doing most of the work, the general contractors were getting most of the money. That's when she decided that she could be a general contractor herself.

"This isn't open-heart surgery," she said,



PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

**Aesthetic:** Eileen Gould in a bathroom her firm remodeled for a client in Agoura Hills; below, a kitchen redecorated in granite.



figuring that by taking on a dual role she could not only increase her revenue but save clients money as well.

Gould set about learning the electrical trade in the early 1990s and worked with a licensed electrician for a few years in order to get the field experience required for a general contractor's license. Once she got that license, she went looking for subcontractors who were skilled, honest and reliable.

She said it wasn't easy.

"Half of these guys have no education, no common sense and no rapport with the client," she said. "I felt like I was babysitting most of the time."

Through years of trial and error, Gould developed a stable of regular subs on which she relies.

"I have had the same cabinet guy for 17 years," she said. "I've used all of my subs on jobs in my own house, so I know they are trustworthy."

The quality of her subcontractors' work

impressed **Kunal Karandikar**, a client who hired Gould to do a water-damage renovation job early this year. He and his family had purchased a home in Calabasas but it suffered extensive damage when a bathroom pipe burst overnight just before they moved in.

"It was a horrible, horrible experience, with a lot of ambiguity and anxiety around getting the money from the insurance company and whether it would be enough," Karandikar said.

He also worried about whether the house could be repaired in time for his children to start school.

"We sat down with Eileen over lunch and she was very confident and reassuring," he said. "She said she had worked with insurance companies before and she would be able to help us."

In the end, Karandikar said, the damage was so great that the renovation ran into six figures. But Gould completed it on budget and only slightly over the expected time line – for rea-

sons beyond her control. Karandikar was especially impressed with two of Gould's subs – **Treasures of America Painting Inc.** in Sylmar and **Conejo Valley Electric** in Westlake Village – and plans to use them again.

"The value add (Gould) brought was getting all the subs to show up on schedule and communicating change orders for prior approval," he said.

## Not easy

**Riki F. Lovejoy**, founder of San Antonio construction consultancy **RFL Consulting Solutions Inc.** and president of the **National Association of Women in Construction**, said the building trade has been slow to change when it comes to accepting women. When she started out doing carpentry and masonry, Lovejoy said, the treatment she got in the field was often rude and crude.

"It's much better today than it was 20 years ago, but there are still men out there who don't respect women anywhere, let alone on a job site," she said.

For women who can work in the male-dominated construction field, however, the rewards are ample. In fact, it's only in construction and transportation that women business owners pull in more revenue on average than their male counterparts, according to the American Express study. It says that 12 percent of women-owned construction firms reported \$500,000 or more in annual revenue, compared to just 11 percent of all construction firms surveyed.

But the industry is anxiety prone for everyone, and headaches are inevitable when dealing with clients spending money on their biggest investment – their homes.

"It's a 24-hour, people-pleasing situation," Gould said. "Some people will take a magnifying glass to a piece of baseboard to point out something they think is wrong."

After nearly two decades, she said that she has learned particularly unreasonable clients usually are unhappy about something else in their lives.

"At that point, I try to remember that it's not about me, so I don't take it personally," she said.